Western Beauty Standards

and their Impact on Young Women

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“I got this dress on sale and I got this body for free,
but you have been making me pay for both
ever since.”[1]

Alok Vaid-Menon

[1] Kabiraj, The Indian Express: “I Watch You Watch Me” (2017)

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Preface

Concerning my personal relation to the topic of beauty standards, I can say that politics, psychology and philosophy have been interests of mine for quite a while. Since I have been out as a trans woman, the subject of beauty has been inescapable. A feeling of inferiority used to overcome me when I looked at all the beautiful cis women in my surroundings. After discussing this issue with my psychiatrist, I decided to address it in dancing class at school, where all participants besides me were cis women. I compared myself very much to them concerning beauty and femininity - both embodied in dancing.

Through amazing conversations I then had with some of my peers, both my view on beauty and on myself started to change: I realized that the cis women I saw as flawless and ideal were struggling with their body images, too. They would never have thought that they could possibly be seen as ideals of beauty and femininity.

This realization was an important lesson on my journey of self love, one whose impression lasted and made me want to dive deeper into the mechanisms of beauty standards. Beauty has a great importance for me as something to reflect upon. The absurd importance it has in society however is in stark contrast to the aspired insignificance of outer appearance in the feminist utopias I came in touch with in the course of my youth.

It thus seemed logical and important to choose the societal aspect of beauty as a subject for my matura paper. More precisely, I wanted to learn more about the experiences of young women and the mechanisms of beauty standards behind them.

1. Introduction

In this paper with a theoretical focus, the questions “What are beauty standards for women in the West today?”, “What is their history?”, “What is their impact on young women?” and “What are different experiences of white women vs. women of color and cis women vs. trans women?” will be discussed one after another. In the following, beauty standards are always to be understood as Western beauty standards only, also in cases in which it is not stated explicitly.

Although the first question might seem obvious, it is absolutely necessary to establish a common understanding of the topic. A vague idea of what beauty standards are is simply not a stable basis for a paper like this. Aesthetic ideals are like a phantom everyone feels, but hardly anyone can describe in detail without research.

The second question arose because only by learning about the past, we are able to fully understand and reflect the present. I want to find out whether - and if yes, when and how - perceptions of beauty have changed.That is exactly what made me want to find answers to the question: What is the history of Western beauty standards?

The third question is closer to personal experiences, so it suits the paper’s practical part. The core of this work is to find out: What impacts do Western beauty standards have on young women? Thereby, the focus lies on how individuals in my surroundings are affected on an emotional, psychological level rather than what statistics of mental health in connection to beauty standards look like.

For this paper to have a scientific and emancipatory worth, it is vital to prevent the creation of a single story through too many generalizations by worshipping the differences in young women’s experiences based on their identities.[2] That’s exactly what research has been lacking so far: An understanding of the realities of trans women as well as Women of Color, as these groups are underrepresented in established academic research teams. In view of this bias, differences in perception appear probable. To find out whether and in what forms this is true, the paper

[2] Comp. Ngozi Adichie, TED: “The danger of a single story” (2009)

contains quotes and thoughts from trans women and women of color - both people I interviewed and journalists, artists and activists. I expect that trans women have a different point of view on beauty standards than cis women, as well as Women of Color in comparison to white women.

As I am starting to plan my work, it is important to me that the spirit of the conversations that led me to the subject could be continued and felt by other young women. This can be perfectly realized in my practical part: In order to cover a wide range of experiences, I will have to speak to a lot of people anyway. By letting them speak to each other instead of speaking with everyone in a dialogue, I hope to bring this wonderful experience of shared stories to the people I will invite to my practical part.

I call the thing I plan “group process”: Ten people participate in an afternoon-filling programme I have prepared. In the first part, all participants answer a questionnaire. After every page, we will discuss the questions together.
In the second part, the group will split up into smaller groups of two or three and discuss the question: “How do beauty standards influence my self-perception, my self-worth and psyche”. They will record their conversations in audio files that I will transcribe later. To make the results of my research more accessible, I will turn selected quotes of these conversations into a booklet, as a second half of my practical part.

Ultimately, the information I hope to gain through the group process will meet with my theoretical research in books and on the internet. Together, all this material should allow me to answer my four questions.

2. Characteristics of Western Beauty Standards

In this chapter, the readers ought to get an idea of the nature of Western beauty standards and understand them with the help of examples. Although the approach to this chapter was simple, a fair amount of interesting information could be gathered, namely through banal methods such as googling “most beautiful woman in the world”[3]. The most named person is Bella Hadid, a US-American model. When googling “beautiful women”[4] and analyzing what features these women had in common with each other and with Bella Hadid, the first thing one notices is: Practically all of them are white women. All of them skinny and able-bodied, most of them long, straight or little wavy hair. All of them wear make-up, probably a lot of them had cosmetic surgeries done - their features and proportions look similar and thus seem to form a uniformity.

2.1. Facial Beauty Standards

Fig. 1: The Instagram Face
by the example of Kylie Jenner

Through social media, this uniformity has become the basis of an icon. Like in icon painting, there are strong rules bodies and faces must follow in order to be an icon - in order to be praised. Details about these rules of facial beauty standards were revealed in an article about the “Instagram Face”: A phenomenon of a certain face composition that has taken shape on Instagram. It consists of juvenile, poreless skin, high cheekbones, cat-like eyes, extra long eyelashes, a small, pointed nose and full lips.[5] Journalist Jia Tolentino calls it “the face of a white woman, but with ethnic features”[6]. Make-up artist Colby Smith, who was interviewed by Tolentino, specifies: “We’re talking an overly tan skin tone, a South Asian influence with the brows and eye shape, an African-American influence with the lips, a Caucasian influence with the nose, a cheek

[3] Comp. Google, “most beautiful woman in the world”
[4] Comp. Google, “beautiful women”
[5] Comp. Tolentino, The New Yorker: “The Age of Instagram Face” (2019)
[6] Tolentino, The New Yorker: “The age of Instagram Face” (2019)

structure that is predominantly Native American and Middle Eastern."[7] As a result, the Instagram Face is a perfectly universal icon that appeals to women of all ethnicities. Going back to the google results for "beautiful women", the Instagram Face can be found in literally all of them.

The influence of the Instagram Face is tremendous: Parallel to the rising popularity of Instagram, the demand for according facial cosmetic surgery has increased continuously, according to Kim Kardashian's possible cosmetic surgeon Dr. Jason Diamond.[8]

Besides the number one icon of beauty, there is what I call a popular standard. In contrast with the icon, the popular standard is less extravagant and more firmly anchored in society, as it developed before the Instagram Face. It is an older ideal - symmetry and proportions of the face concerned already the ancient Greeks greatly - that is more accepted and normalized, as it is less exaggerated.[9] Still, the popular standard is an ideal, and ideals are by definition unreachable.[10] A prevalent example of a popular beauty standard for faces is big eyes with long lashes, a narrow, straight nose, and lips that are not necessarily lush, but certainly don't attract attention by a flaw in any form. Compared to the icon standard, the Instagram Face, the rules for lips and cheekbones are not as strict. It is the face of a white woman without the ethnic features. In general, a face that represents the popular standard is as symmetrical as possible and bears proportions that have grown to be seen as harmonic. People who conform to this standard tend to not realize their privilege, because the hierarchy of beauty is a mean, clever concept: It makes you focus on the fact that there is always someone above you who is closer to the number one icon, someone who performs better.

This works greatly on the basis of a general custom of planting a seed of insecurity and altruism in girls' psyches. Binarily gendered upbringing leads to different psychological patterns in amab (assigned male at birth) versus afab (assigned female at birth) people. However, socialization continues throughout a person's life.

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[7] Tolentino, The New Yorker: "The Age of Instagram Face" (2019)
[8] Comp. Strugatz, Los Angeles Times: "Influencer subculture: the Kim Kardashian lookalikes" (2018)
[9] Comp. Keeler, Slice: "This is where Beauty Standards Actually Come From" (2020)
[10] Comp. Krause, Analyse und Kritik: "Schönheitssoziologie - ein Überblick" (Ausgabe 01/2014)

Trans women therefore become aware of the expectations towards women, especially about beauty, and follow them shockingly quickly in many cases.

2.2. Beauty Standards for Body Shapes

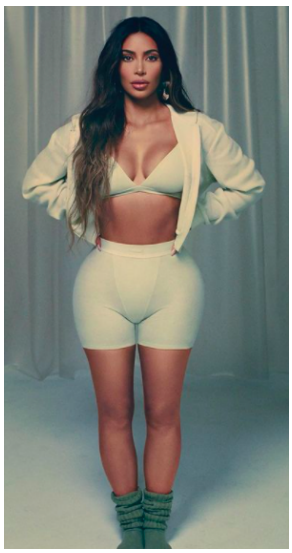

Fig. 2: Slim Thickness by the example of Kim Kardashian

The icon beauty standard for body shape is “Slim Thickness”. The contradicting two parts of the term are program: The desired look is a flat stomach and a tiny waist in combination with big breasts and large hips. The legs are supposed to be curvy but not big. Stretch marks or cellulite are an absolute no go.[11] In summary, it means being skinny and curvy at the same time - a combination of fatphobia and hypersexualization of women's bodies, a fusion of the ideal of a skinny white woman and the fetishization of Women of Color’s stereotypical curviness.

Slim Thickness is the perfect, impossibly reachable hyperfemininity promoted and established primarily by the Kardashian family (white people who appropriate Black aesthetics) and artists like Cardi B or Nicki Minaj (light-skinned People of Color who are idols of beauty to both white people and People of Color). When I say impossibly reachable, I do not consider the existence of photo editing and cosmetic surgery. It is between probable and proven that a good part of today’s symbols of beauty use apps like face tune or advanced alternatives of it and beforehand have had cosmetic surgery.[12] Still, practically all of them deny both procedures mentioned. This is very harmful, as (young) women compare their natural everyday-self to these unrealistic pictures.

In opposition to the Instagram Face, which people try to reach through cosmetic surgeries, Slim Thickness is promoted as reachable for anyone just by doing the right work-outs. A lot of money is made with products like work-out corsets or diet teas - without any proof that they are effective.

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[11] Comp. Fargo, Women’s Health Magazine: “You Asked What 'Slim Thick' Means, So We Asked the Experts” (2021)
[12]Comp. Tolentino, The New Yorker: “The age of Instagram Face” (2019)

Slim Thickness is an exaggeration and logic sequel of the already previously established 90-60-90 standard, also known as the Hourglass Shape. It describes a body shape with a chest circumference of 90 cm, a waist of 60 cm and hips of 90 cm.

Parallel to the icon ideal Slim Thickness and its tamer sibling Hourglass Shape, there is a popular standard: Being skinny but not curvy is considered more beautiful, desirable and healthy than being curvy but not skinny. People who have a flat stomach but not big curves therefore have thin privilege: Their bodies are seen as “neutral” and healthy, clothes are likely to fit them best, even furniture is built for thin people: Chairs may not be wide enough, or the space between the seat of chair and the table is not big enough, as the dimensions of the furniture are calculated with the assumption that a skinny person will buy, own and use it. Skinny people are the most represented group regarding body shape in popular media. People whose stomach is not flat - even if they have more curves in reverse - face fatphobia. Often, a connection between beauty and health is made: Being fat is considered both ugly and unhealthy. This is not by chance: In the 19th Century, eugenics connected beauty, health and race through concepts like the Body Mass Index (BMI).[13]

Fat people are ridiculed, urged to hide their stomachs and to lose weight. Fatphobia is not just a mental problem: Fat people are discriminated against in health care: Every symptom is blamed on them being fat, the patient is not taken seriously.[14] Our learned beauty standards lead to biases in health and scientific research, which cement the privilege of the skinny. These dynamics are extremely visible in popular TV shows like Miss Germany or Germany’s Next Topmodel, but also in the experiences of my interviewees. With that in mind, a fat woman like singer Lizzo, who doesn’t deny the world her beauty, is a real blessing.

Of course, all defined ideals are just landmarks on a spectrum. The essential aspect of that spectrum is that precise divisions enable hierarchies and competition, while the ultimative icon is unreachable for everyone, also for the proportionally privileged on the spectrum.

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[13] Comp. Levine, 2016, P. 31
[14] Comp. Conversation with Selma and Maïmuna

2.3. Beauty Standards for Women of Color

Because Google thinks of white women as the norm of women, one has to google “beautiful Black women”[15] in order to find out what specific standards for Black women exist. The Instagram Face and Slim Thickness are prominent in this case as well. Most women shown are relatively light-skinned and carry their hair open, often straightened or in waves, not curls. Afros, locks or braids are rare, but can be found, as well as dark-skinned Black women. In conclusion, there seems to be a colorist beauty standard (more on colorism in chapter 4.2.3.). While a few dark-skinned Black women are icons of beauty on that Google page, colorism is still very present both in the beauty industry and in society. This is an example of how the icon standard and the popular standard influence each other: After huge Black Lives Matter demonstrations following the killing of George Floyd by a white police officer, Black women in general, but also dark-skinned women in particular were represented in the media more often than before. This influence the mass has on the media, the media mirrors back to the mass.

To get a more complete idea of beauty standards for the BIPOC community, “beautiful Asian woman”[16] has to be typed into the search engine. These images show light-skinned, East Asian women, again most of them skinny, with long, straight hair and an Instagram Face. South Asian people (who are typically rather dark-skinned) are not represented at all. To do so, I want to recommend the fabulous, self-described “obviously attractive” artist Radam Ridwan (pronouns: they/them). I learned a lot about racism in connection to beauty standards thanks to their unpaid educational work on social media.

Colorism is visible as well when googling “beautiful Arabic woman”[17]: Most of them are white-passing, some of them wear a hijab. According to an interviewee who sometimes wears a headscarf, it must be suspected that this is about the fetishization of hijabis, rather than genuine representation or diversity.[18]

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[15] Comp. Google, “beautiful Black women”
[16] Comp. Google, “beautiful Asian women”
[17] Comp. Google, “beautiful Arabic women”
[18] Comp. Information Selma

2.4. Humans of Beauty - between fighting and reproducing Beauty Standards

Doing research on the developments around the Instagram Face and Slim Thickness, one tends to judge people like the Kardashians or Bella Hadid and label them as superficial and damaging. Certainly, there is truth to that. Nevertheless, there are insights in these people's psyches (which are voyeuristic and abusive themselves, because these people's privacy is ignored), that indicate an emotional impact caused by the beauty standards and the expectations imposed on them. They are not just executives of beauty standards, they are emotionally affected by them as well - just like any human being. There are reports that Kim Kardashian saw an unedited photo of her butt and legs showing stretch marks and cellulite - she reacted by saying she didn't look like that and that it was a fake. This implies that her fans are not the only ones who are fooled by edited pictures.[19]

Another thing that dismantles an eventual good versus evil scheme is that a lot of these embodiments of beauty standards are vocal about political issues and social change, whether it is feminism, Black Lives Matter or trans day of visibility. Of course, the truthfulness of these activities can be doubted. Many activists and advocates for social change consider political social media posts by celebrities performative. But what about nonbinary singers Demi Lovato (pronouns: they/them) and Sam Smith (pronouns: they/them)? Is their activism performative just because they are famous? Is other befriended celebrities' allyship not legitimate?

As indicated above, representation of Black people in the media and the beauty industry rose during and after massive Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the USA and all over the planet that followed the murder of George Floyd. This sudden change was celebrated as a win by some, mocked as an absurd example of marketing strategy and performative pseudo-activism by others. One example that was very present on Instagram's trans community was Black trans model Jari Jones' billboard campaign for Calvin Klein. Another is Aaron Philip, a disabled Black trans woman who models for Moschino. What's interesting is that Moschino also works with Bella Hadid, who is on the opposite end of the beauty standard's hierarchy:

[19] Comp. Le, The Female Gaze: "Schönheitsideale stressen auch diejenigen, die sie setzen" (2021)

Able-bodied, white-passing (as her father is Jordanian, it would be misleading to call her white) and cisgender.

Fig. 3: Jari Jones in front of her billboard

Fig. 4: Aaron Philip on the rollway for Moschino

The fluidity between ambassadors of the status quo and revolutionaries of the beauty industry is a common phenomenon that can be found for example in singer and actor Rihanna's lingerie collection Savage x Fenty. Rihanna is a pop star, a light-skinned Black woman who has thin privilege and carries her hair mostly straightened (This is not to say that straightening one's hair is bad. The point is the noticeability of a phenomenon: A lot of the world's most famous black women habitually carry their hair straightened: Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey, Beyoncé, Rihanna, Lizzo).[20] In her collection's campaign, models of all skin tones and body types are featured. Still, none of them carry visible body hair. Further, the pieces are designed to fit cis bodies. Is this really "celebrating fearlessness and inclusivity"?[21] It is necessary to analyze every example differentiated instead of quickly labeling it as either fully good or completely evil.

Someone who rebels against beauty standards in a way that is supportable for more radical activists is singer Lizzo. She is an advocate for fat liberation and other issues

[20] Comp. Google, "most famous black women"
[21] Comp. Savage X Fenty - About

of social change. Still, she often straightens her hair and removes her body hair. Again - this is no personal critique, but rather an observation that the emancipation of Black people's hair texture (more on texturism in chapter 4.2.3.) and the body hair movement are not widespread enough by now.

Fig. 5: The aesthetic feminism of body hair by the example of Esther Calixte-Bea

A great leader in the body hair movement - besides Alok Vaid-Menon - is Black cis woman Esther Calixte-Bea. She wears her chest-, leg- and armpit hair with pride and elegance and thereby produces images that are extremely important for the world to see in order to unlearn the idea(l) of hairless women.

In conclusion, a lot of celebrities and activists who fight against western beauty standards still reproduce them in some way (and have pretty privilege in some fields). Further, a lot of the work is done by Black women. This is a general pattern when it comes to engagement for social change: Those who are lower in society's hierarchies, who experience intersectional discrimination, have a clearer view on structures of oppression and are more courageous, because they have little to no privilege to lose: A historical example is Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera's leadership in the stonewall riots. Trans women of color were more fearless in their political action than white cis gay and bisexual men, who were more careful, as they had white and male privilege to lose and were not affected by racism and misogyny.[22]

[22] Comp. Oliver and Ali, USA Today: "Why we owe Pride to black transgender women who threw bricks at cops" (2019)

3. The History of Beauty Standards

The aim of this chapter is to discuss how beauty standards evolved throughout the centuries, in order to get a deeper understanding of the origins of beauty standards and the systems that have built and maintained them. In “The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are used against women” feminist author Naomi Wolf states that anthropologists failed to explain the existence and character of todays beauty standards by the evolutionary phenomenon of sexual selection. Rather, beauty standards were constructed by the catholic church, colonizers and more recently the mass media and social media to maintain sociopolitical hierarchies and sell products. Therefore, they should be seen as a human intervention into sexual selection.[23]

3.1. The Eugenic Roots of Beauty Standards

In sociological and historical research, there is a broad consensus that today's beauty standards still carry past ideologies in them. One of those is eugenics. Although primarily associated with the Nazis’ ideology and cruel experiments in concentration camps during the Second World War[24], eugenics was there far before and remained long after the holocaust.[25] Getting more and more popular from the 1870s on, eugenics centered around the vision of increasing the quality of humanity’s gene pool. To reach this, people whose genes were considered inferior were sterilized to prevent their reproduction.

Among the targeted groups were poor people, disabled people, People of Color and people with a low IQ. The IQ, and also the BMI, in fact, are eugenic inventions.[26] Not only did IQ tests of that time ask candidates to define the prettier out of two drawn faces, it fused more or less rational science with racist, classist and ableist judgments, which led to a classification of societal value based on one’s appearance.[27]

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[23] Comp. DeFino, Teen Vogue: “How White Supremacy and Capitalism Influence Beauty Standards” (2020)
[24] Comp. Levine, 2016, P. 11, Image 1
[25] Comp. Levine, 2016, P. 9 - 11
[26] Comp. Levine, 2016, P. 31
[27] Comp. Levine, 2016, P. 33, Image 4

Thus, eugenics is not just about reducing human suffering by breeding out diseases, but at least as much about moving human variance towards one ideal. Biology and aesthetics have been mixed up to make discriminatory ideas of beauty and strength seem legitimate. What was considered beautiful was considered healthy and valuable, therefore in turn sexually desirable and therefore again - beautiful.

This circle of justifications for white supremacy and ableist violence has survived in our heads like tin food and can now be opened, consumed and shared without suspecting anything evil at any time. Especially in times of pandemic, the fact that society has not yet exceeded the archaic thought of the survival of the fittest, becomes shockingly visible.The attitude that only old, weak, sick and disabled people will be concerned by the virus made people take the pandemic less seriously. As soon as personal freedom is restricted, people are glad to sacrifice their fellow human beings. In January 2021, a politician from Zurich praised the pandemic as a cure for high obesity rates and an aging society in a tweet he deleted later, after a giant shitstorm.[28] This pattern of tying up beauty and health stands in eugenic traditions. Eugenics shaped our ideas of what and who is beautiful. It taught us to trust beautiful people - white, rich, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual people - and mistrust or even fear all other human beings.

Last but not least, colorism was established through eugenics. People of Color, in this case of US history especially Indigenous people, were considered uncivilized by white colonizers, namely in a hierarchy with finest nuances. The darker the skin, the lower one’s position. While marriage and reproduction between a Black and a white individual was discouraged or even prohibited, they were allowed and encouraged between a white and an Indigenous individual in order to assimilate Indigenous people who were light-skinned enough to be believed to be capable of reaching a higher civilizational level.[29] As the strict segregation between Black and white people started to decompose in the acid steams of the civil rights movement, the belief that light-skinned Black people were more valuable, since they were “closer to white people”, remained. This colorist hierarchy pressured Black people into erasing their

[28] Comp. Gut, Limmattaler Zeitung: “FDP-Politiker stellt auf Twitter Recht auf Existenz von Kranken und Alten in Frage – er empört User” (2021)
[29] Comp. Levine, 2016, P. 88-96

blackness by giving up traditional clothes or hair styles, but also by using dangerous skin lightening products, as I will discuss more deeply in chapter 3.3.3. - Skin Tone. It is a dynamic still visible today in the general expectation that people of color ought to fit into white norms.

A comparable impact was made by the pseudo-science of physiognomy. It's doctrine is that physical appearance - and thereby beauty - and character are interdependent.[30] This belief built a mechanism that works in two ways: On one hand, it stigmatized the use of beautifying products, as beauty was supposed to be natural, since it could be reached by simply being a good person. Being a good person, a respectable woman, meant following patriarchal rules. In conclusion, silently enduring or even gladly embracing one's oppression was established as the number one recipe to satisfy the desire to be beautiful. This exact way of living also promised a happy and successful life in a respectable marriage with an esteemed man. On the other hand, women who were considered beautiful were labeled as good and virtuous, and therefore had higher chances of social climbing.[31] This motivated the secret use of cosmetics and was so to say the invention of pretty privilege.

This double control of women through beauty standards and the dogmas how they could be fulfilled - combined with a justification in "science" - have had an alarming social and economic power ever since.

[30] Comp. Whitefield-Madrano, The New Inquiry: „Breaking Down Beauty: Physiognomy Revisited" (2012)
[31] Comp. Herzig, 2015, P. 36 and Peiss, 1998, P. 24

3.2. The History of Body Hair Removal

Let's start with today's situation around body hair removal: There is no research needed to know that the beauty standard for women in the West is hairless, smooth skin all over the body. Even though everyone knows that every hairless adult person must have removed their hair in some way, this should not be visible: The skin is supposed to look like a child's. The natural, hairy reality of an adult woman is considered disgusting and unsexy, whereas shaved legs, armpits and genitals are considered beautiful and desirable. This idea has been cemented by the porn industry and reveals a problematic view on femininity, sexuality and last but not least about children in patriarchy: The female archetype is child-like, whereas the male archetype is of an adult appearance (this includes muscles, body and facial hair). This is an instrument to make women seem less adult and thereby less autonomous and serious. This in turn makes the sexual objectification of a child-like body possible and normalized.[32] The few women who refuse to remove their body hair are confronted with prejudice and stares. By portraying them as a controversial sensation, the media creates a freak show people can and do consume. Simultaneously, there is a relatively small but growing body hair movement. This form of aesthetic feminism has reached cat walks and adidas sportswear campaigns[33], but hardly middle-class environments such as schools or public baths.

3.2.1. Shaving

Well then, how did we get to this point? A remarkable date is 1903, when the T-shaped razor with disposable blades, invented by King Camp Gillette eight years previously, was launched as an industrially produced tool of everyday life. At first, the Gillette Company's marketing targeted exclusively men: Shaving was the measure to prevent the spread of lice during the first World War. In 1915, the first razor for women was sold. The "Milady Decolletée" was no big success: Shaving was still associated with masculinity. Still, women started to see the safety razor as a more comfortable way of body hair removal, compared to dangerous methods like corrosive creams or x-rays. The razor's breakthrough was completed by a shortage

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[32] Comp. O'Farrell, VulgaDrawings: "Find your perfect woman" (2021) and Interview with Elena and Noa

[33] Comp. Solé, Yahoo: "Adidas model who revealed armpit hair responds to criticism: 'I am beyond proud'" (2021)

of thick stockings during World War II, because silk and nylon were prioritized for military use. Covering hairy legs with stockings therefore became less of an option. The establishment of shorter and shorter dresses during the 50s and 60s did the rest of the job: By 1964, 98% of US-American women aged 15-44 shaved their legs regularly.[34]

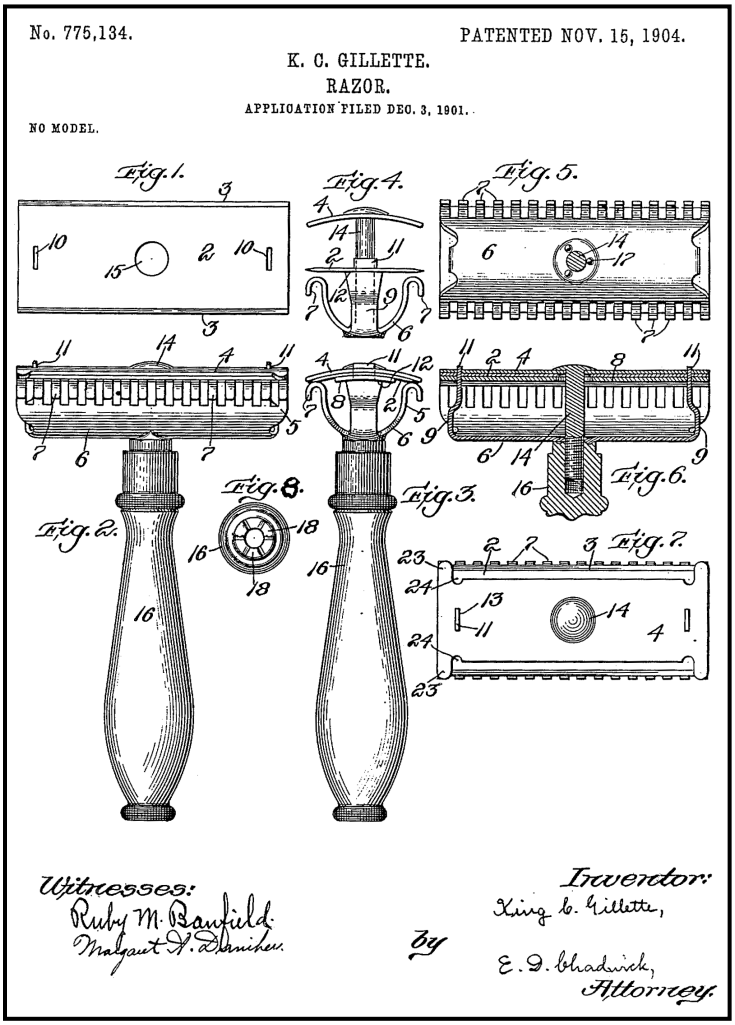
No. 775,134. PATENTED NOV. 15, 1904.
K. C. GILLETTE.
RAZOR.
APPLICATION FILED DEC. 3, 1901.
NO MODEL.
Fig. 1. Fig. 4. Fig. 5. Fig. 2. Fig. 8. Fig. 3. Fig. 6. Fig. 7.
Witnesses: Ruby M. Banfield. Margaret A. Shniker.
Inventor: King C. Gillette, by E. G. Chadwick, Attorney.

Fig. 6: King C. Gillette's 1904 patent for a new safety razor

[34] Comp. Herzig, 2015, P. 122-128 and Matteo, Owlcation: "When Did Women Start Shaving? The History of Female Hair Removal" (2019)

3.2.2. Waxing and Lasering

While shaving remains the most popular hair removal technique, the two most common alternatives waxing and lasering convince some with their advantages. But while they have to be applied less often, these techniques are more expensive and less easy to integrate into everyday life.[35] What connects them with past times is that there were always multiple techniques that shared the market of body hair removal products. People have always been fascinated with science and wanted to incorporate it into life. A historical example that is very uncommon today are X-Ray salons for body hair removal.[36]

3.2.3. Creams, Lotions and Powders

Let’s dig a bit deeper into the history of body hair removal - what about these industrial hair removing creams mentioned earlier? As in many cases, things changed with the Industrial Revolution: Factory owners saw an economic potential in body hair removal. They sought to replace primitive home made tools for shaving and plucking with fancy creams, lotions and powders. As people were impressed by the novel chemicals and knew little about their dangers, selling such products was easy. Ads idealized them as a magic way to perfection. What‘s more is that before the invention of the safety razor, shaving was quite unpleasant or even dangerous, since people often cut themselves.[37] The creams often contained deadly ingredients such as lead, arsene or thallium compounds.[38] As a consequence, a large number of people injured themselves severely, various individuals even died. Unsurprisingly, the injured people were mocked publicly instead of their cases being taken serious.[39] The general danger of these products was ignored for most of the 19th century. Being beautiful was such a strong desire, people risked their lives to reach it. Without the invention of the safety razor, this would probably have continued.

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[35] Comp. Conversation with Alma
[36] Comp. Herzig, 2015, P. 75-97
[37] Comp. Herzig, 2015, P. 37
[38] Comp. Herzig, 2015, P. 40
[39] Comp. Herzig, 2015, P. 47

3.2.4. Connection to Indigenous People and Racism

What is important to state is that all previously given information describes former or more recent developments around the topic of body hair, not its origins. Already before the Industrial Revolution, the beauty standard for women was a hairless face and neck, the only parts of the body which were not covered by cloth. This ideal was reached by using home made razors such as sharpened sea shells or stones or primitive tweezers.[40] These techniques, which were practiced in secrecy, because beautification was seen as faking, were overtaken from Indigenous peoples: Many of them had customs of body hair removal across all genders (many Indigenous peoples had other ideas of gender than white people beforehand) for spiritual purposes. When European colonizers arrived and annected Indigenous land, they observed these customs and stated they were stupid and uncivilized, animalic urges the inferior race of Indigenous people could not resist. From there on, the subject of body hair occupied white “scientists” greatly, whereas it was nothing white people (or rather: white men) were aware of before. The coincidental difference in dealing with body hair was instrumentalized for racial theories. It was used to “prove” the superiority of white people and used as one of many justifications for genocide and forced “civilization” of Indigenous people.[41]

As nearly all white “scientists” were cis men, their work focused on cis men of different ethnicities and ignored the fact that simultaneously to their assumptions, white women were removing body hair regularly, according to the Western beauty standard for women at that time. Men just didn’t realize this was happening, as beautifying techniques were stigmatized and practised in secrecy. So, men set up a beauty standard of hairless women, while condemning body hair removal. A large part of the basis of this ideal must have been that often, older men desired and married younger women. This connection of youth and beauty lasts until today: What is child-like (a hairless body) is seen as feminine and therefore as beautiful in women.

[40] Comp. Herzig, P. 28-29
[41] Comp. Herzig, 2015, P. 19-33

Later, when Indigenous people were less present in the colonizer's minds, because a large part of them were killed or forcibly relocated, they began to incorporate Indigenous beauty standards into white beauty standards. This means that the ideal shifted from hairy to hairless. On one hand, this led to a consolidation of the gender binary and patriarchy, on the other hand, it made the commercial beauty industry possible. Being able to afford body hair removal then became a tool of classism and white supremacy that continued after the time of slavery. Therefore, working class people and (formerly) enslaved people aspired to follow the ideal of smooth, hairless (and white or light-skinned) skin.[42] The hairless ideal is embodied by white politicians until today, whereas hairiness has become uncivilized and ferocious. This showed for example in the propaganda during the American war on terror and the abuse of detainees in Guantanamo: People with beards were marked as terrorists, Guantanamo prisoners were forcibly shaved in order to take individuality and pride from them.[43]

In conclusion, body hair has always been instrumentalized as a tool of power and oppression. The people in charge did not hesitate to opportunistically change the rules of beauty and power in whatever way suited them best at any moment.

[42] Comp. Herzig, 2015, P. 77
[43] Comp. Herzig, 2015, P. 1-4

3.3. The History of Make-Up

As make-up and body hair removal both are beautifying techniques, their histories show parallels. One of them is the significant change in the societal and moral view on it: While make-up was socially ostracized in the 18th and 19th century, it is completely normal, sometimes even expected or compulsory today. A second commonality is that early industrial make-up products were toxic and caused injuries and deaths, often in the shape of lead poisonings.[44]

3.3.1. The Aspect of Gender

Until the 18th century, the use of cosmetics was more a question of class than of gender: Upper class people (noble people and elite colonizers) of all genders wore make-up.[45] The American Revolution changed the image of both masculinity and femininity: “Manly citizens and virtuous women were expected to reject (…) beauty preparations.“[46] On one hand, because they were associated with immorality, as heavy make-up was the main identification feature of sex workers. On the other hand, they were associated with aristocracy.[47] Therefore, they had no legitimate role in a republican and religious society. This is a pattern that can be observed after many revolutions. People try to live more simply and egalitarian than the old elites until a new elite has formed. The male ideal of the post-revolutionary years lasted until today: Men’s superiority is seen as inherent. Thereby, there is no need to manifest it through fancy looks. A gentleman is supposed to present neat, but simple. This becomes visible in fashion history as well: While women’s fashion changes a lot throughout decades and centuries, men have been wearing shirts, pants and suits since the French Revolution.[48]

The female ideal of these post-revolutionary years is also one that can be observed up to our age: The one of natural beauty. There is again a connection to physiognomy: Painting one’s face was interpreted as masquerading one’s natural look and thereby one’s true character. The saying “Beauty comes from the inside”

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[44] Comp. Peiss, 1998, P. 10
[45] Comp. Peiss, 1998, P. 23
[46] Peiss, 1998, P.23
[47] Comp. Herzig, 2015, P. 37
[48] Comp. Lee, Gentleman’s Gazette: “History of the Suit: The Evolution of Menswear from 1800 to today” (2020)

was typical for that time: Women were expected to be beautiful without modifying their appearance, but since there was a very specific idea of beauty, there still was a social pressure to do so.[49] To a certain extent, this is still true today, mainly in some men's opinion. Natalie Wynn sums it up vividly: "If you wear no make-up, they think you look diseased. If you wear natural make-up, they think you are not wearing any make-up and they like it. If you wear campy make-up, they think it's dumb and they hate it."[50]

3.3.2. Cosmetics versus Paint

This narrative of natural beauty historically resulted in a separation of "cosmetics" and "paints". Cosmetics were said to "assist nature" while paints constructed a "mummy surface".[51] The use of cosmetics was encouraged and declared as a religious duty: "Beauty is a blessing of God, and everyone ought to preserve it."[52] Through this religious argument, the early capitalist beauty industry could be morally justified. With expanding possibilities of transport and information, the accessibility of chemical substances rose. As the market of beautifying products grew, the producers of make-up slowly started to label products formerly sold as paints as cosmetics, in order to make them more accepted and thereby easier to sell. Like this, the distinction between the two categories gradually faded and cosmetics became a term for all beauty products. With the invention of photography and the improving quality of mirrors, more extensive techniques of painting became popular, as people were more conscious about their appearance, since they saw themselves and other individuals they could compare themselves to more often.[53] This trend has recently been reinforced with the invention of cell phones and social media.

3.3.3. Skin Tone

Before and during the age of the Industrial Revolution, the focus in cosmetics was on skin whitening.[54] Beauty was understood as a "function of race"[55], while simultaneously, the white beauty was proclaimed as superior, leaving no space for

[49] Comp. Peiss, 1998, P. 12
[50] Wynn, ContraPoints: "Beauty" (2019)
[51] Peiss, 1998, P. 12
[52] Peiss, 1998, P. 13
[53] Comp. Peiss, 1998, P. 45-46
[54] Comp. Peiss, 1998, P. 9
[55] Peiss, 1998, P. 31

taste or cultural differences in their perception of beauty.[56] The beauty standard of white skin was - obviously - rooted in racism, but also in classism (discrimination based on socioeconomic class). A tanned complexion was an attribute of working class people or of People of Color. The white bourgeoisie distanced itself from both of these groups to show its civility and power. The white working class seeked to approach itself to the bourgeoisie through skin whitening practices. Further, advertisements targeted on Black people promised beauty and privilege if they whitened their skin. Although these whitening preparations didn't keep their promise, they sold pretty well. This phenomenon still exists today: The market for skin lightening creams is worth 2.3 billion in the USA alone, even though these products are toxic and therefore illegal.[57] Also in many African countries, skin-lightening is popular: 23% of individuals aged among 16 and 30 years use them, according to a survey conducted by the University of Limpopo (South Africa) and the University of the West Indies (Jamaica).[58]

What is even more absurd nowadays is that simultaneously most white people aspire to a more tanned complexion. White people who spend their summer sunbathing are considered more beautiful than pale white people, but above all more beautiful than People of Color who have a similar skin tone - not because they spent the whole summer sunbathing, but because they are racialized. Women of Color I interviewed found this unconscious racism utterly repulsive.[59] Last but not least, this phenomenon is some sort of inverted classism: While pale skin was a sign of wealth in past centuries, it's the tanned complexion in white people that shows that one has time for farniente in the sun and money for travelling to countries where the sun shines all the time. Most rich, famous and influential white people are bronzed either by the sun or solariums or with the help of make-up. Important to note is that bronzing is not inherently racist, but the double standard of bronzed white skin and brown skin being treated differently is. As long as this discriminatory situation exists, white people who bronze profit from and reproduce this racist beauty standard.[60]

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[56] Comp. Peiss, 1998, P. 31
[57] Comp. Adawe and Hassan, Sahan Journal: "Skin-whitening products cost Black and brown communities our money and our health." (2021)
[58] Comp. Rahiman and Davids, The Conversation: „Skin lighteners: fashion and family still driving uptake in South Africa" (2021)
[59] Comp. Conversation with Selma and Maïmuna
[60] Comp. Conversation with Selma and Maïmuna

Another aspect of this phenomenon is that people with ambiguous skin tones are a suitable beauty standard for people with both lighter and darker complexions. Paradigms for embodiments of this ideal are, among others, Zendaya and Doja Cat, who are very popular in internet culture.

Fig. 7: The beauty standard of an ambiguous skin tone by the example of Zendaya

Fig. 8: The beauty standard of an ambiguous skin tone by the example of Doja Cat

4. The Impact of Western Beauty Standards on Young Women

In this chapter, the emotional impact of beauty standards on young women shall be evaluated with the help of personal experiences of fourteen interviewed individuals. The gathered information originates from a deep research conducted in my practical part in the form of qualitative surveys and interviews with women of different identities such as cis and trans women, as well as white women and Women of Color.

4.1 Universal Mechanisms for all Women

Let’s start with the common ground of women’s experiences. In the script of the group process, all interviewed individuals stated their desire to be beautiful between 8 and 10 on a scale from 1 to 10; the impact of how beautiful they feel on their well-being as a 9, with one exception of 7 and 8 respectively. Further, they showed a tendency to perceive themselves as less beautiful than the assumed perception of their partners and friends. This is supported by the fact that the participants estimated themselves to be too critical towards their own beauty and less critical about other people's appearance in comparison.

This also becomes visible in the questionnaire on body hair removal: All women who remove their body hair do so because they dislike it specifically on themselves, not on women or people in general. The mechanism seems to be that women put up stricter rules for themselves than for the women around them. For trans women, another reason for body hair removal is the desire or rather the pressure to pass (to be read as female).

Only one person was quicker noting 5 compliments than 5 flaws about their body. Compliments regarding waist, breasts, face and legs do occur, but stand out. More often, they were about eyes, hair, lips or semi-physical things such as one’s smile or voice. Often listed flaws are body parts such as stomach, chest and legs as well as parts of the face, mostly about the nose or a general asymmetry of the face. A quote

of Alma's summarizes this phenomenon beautifully - she said: "For a very long time, I used to say: 'What I like about my body are my eyelashes' - that's damn little!"[61] The vast majority of participants feels rather too heavy and considers their breasts rather too small.[62] This is a logical consequence of the ideal of Slim Thickness - being lightweight, but still curvy.

If these described symptoms become more profound, connections to the diagnosis of body dysmorphia do not come out of the blue: Even though this paper is not so much about different forms of mental illnesses catalyzed by beauty standards, an understanding of these severe stages is vital to comprehend the beginnings of them in all of us. What all interviewees show and agree upon is: Western beauty standards encourage a distorted view on our bodies and thereby create biased self-perceptions and obsessions with apparent flaws.

What differs are the estimations of how much the participants think they conform to beauty standards and the amount of time and energy they invest in a beautiful appearance.[63] This was to be expected, because they were invited with the idea of covering a broad, diverse spectrum of womanhood.

Another uniting experience is personal development and growth in regard to self-perception. A large part of the interviewees shared stories about their youth: How they have learned to see themselves more positive and independent from given ideals and expectations. This fits a general trend in internet culture: Self-care and self-love. A comprehensible example for such an evolution is body hair removal. Many more of the cis women of the group used to remove their body hair a few years ago compared to how many of them still do so today. For trans women, the same statement can not be made - see Chapter 4.3.2. - Dysphoria and Internalized Transphobia.

The participants share experiences with femininity, where the double control of women strikes again: If one does not perform femininity in the expected way, one is

[61] Conversation with Alma
[62] Comp. Script Group Process
[63] Comp. Script Group Process

likely to be seen as less attractive and might be ridiculed and either refered to as animalic or lesbian. If a woman presents very feminine and is seen as beautiful and attractive, however, she can not possibly be intelligent or taken seriously in any culturally relevant, socially independent way. This is visible in academic and political contexts: Women in such positions tend to use make-up less regularly and less extensively.[64] To find a kind self-perception, a stable feeling of worth and beauty in this area of tension is complicated and tiring.

[64] Comp. Wynn, ContraPoints: “Beauty” (2019)

4.2. Experiences of Women of Color

This chapter will evaluate connections between beauty standards and racism. People of Color have a different perspective on beauty standards, as there are many mechanisms that remain invisible to white people. Some of them shall be described here on the basis of the experiences of interviewed Women of Color.

4.2.1. Representation

A key experience of Women of Color is lack of representation. One interviewee reported that she has often been declined at castings for theatres and movies because she “wasn’t the type” - by which they meant that she wasn’t white.[65] Due to such dynamics in the film industry, but also in the beauty, literative, tv and music sector, People of Color are less likely to see someone they can truly identify with and are obstructed on their path of becoming a part of normality in Western countries rather than a socially peripheral group that is constantly excluded and othered by white supremacy. Another interviewee experienced this in the contrast of how she is treated in Switzerland, where she lives, versus in Gambia, where her father comes from. She said that as a mixed person, she is seen as Black in Switzerland and as white in Gambia, but she feels less othered in Gambia, because people there don’t always shove her otherness in her face.[66] If an individual is better represented in a culture, they feel more included in a society, and thereby are more self-confident - which can lead to an increased feeling of being beautiful. In summary, representation and beauty are strongly intertwined: If there are only white models on shows, catwalks and billboards, people take whiteness as the default of beauty. This means that on one hand, white people have a distorted view of beauty and continue to consolidate their power and overrepresentation and on the other hand, that People of Color don’t have the same amount of role models as kids and therefore must invest more emotional work into learning to know that they are beautiful in their adolescence.

[65] Comp. Conversation with Selma and Maïmuna
[66] Comp. Conversation with Selma and Maïmuna

4.2.2. Femininity and Racism

Similarly, whiteness and femininity are strongly intertwined: Black women are often seen as less feminine, rather tough (which is considered masculine) instead of an embodiment of graceful, delicate femininity. Simultaneously, their bodies are sexualized and expected to be curvy - another connection to Slim Thickness as an ideal for all races.[67] One interviewee remarked that she felt a pressure as a juvenile to prove her femininity through her curvy body shape that was seen as a plus, while her Blackness in general was seen as a flaw in her attractiveness compared to white girls her age.[68]

East Asian women (and men) are often seen as very feminine, but in a very cute, dollish way, which is just another form of objectification. Latinas are often portrayed in a hypersexualized way, which is a combination of patriarchal sexual objectification and racial fetishization.[69]

However, Women of Color are united by increased pressure and stricter expectations of their femininity, in whatever form it may come. The closer one's appearance is to whiteness, the more feminine one is perceived. An interviewee stated that she feels more beautiful when she is seen as outstandingly feminine.[70] The fact that historically, modern concepts of femininity have been developed simultaneously with racial theories, is thereby still present in today’s experiences of Women of Color.

4.2.3. Fetishization, Colorism and Texturism

Let’s deepen the subject of fetishization a little more. It is a mechanism of both white supremacy and patriarchy that takes away the right to own their beauty from Women of Color. It puts them into narrow-minded categories and assigns them a very specific role with according attributes. One example was given by an interviewee: A male white friend let her know at various opportunities that his interest in her was mainly reasoned in her identity as an Arabic woman and in the fact that she sometimes wears a headscarf.[71]

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[67] Comp. Conversation with Selma and Maïmuna
[68] Comp. Conversation with Alma
[69] Comp. Conversation with Selma and Maïmuna
[70] Comp. Conversation with Selma and Maïmuna
[71] Comp. Conversation with Selma and Maïmuna

While interest in a culture one doesn't know that well is legitimate and acts of fetishization may seem affirmative on first sight, in reality the person is reduced to that one feature and that feature becomes the only reason why they are considered attractive. Rather even, the person who fetishizes someone else is attracted to a stereotyped image of a racialized group. This is problematic because it takes away the power and self determination from People of Color and reinforces harmful stereotypes.[72]

Colorism is discrimination - mostly within racialized groups - of dark-skinned people. Or, formulated the other way round: Fetishization of light skin tones within BIPOC-Communities. An example where colorism becomes visible is skin lightening (as already mentioned in Chapter 3.3.3. - Skin Tone). However, colorism is already present when looking at the range of make-up products. Often, dark skin tones are hard to find. Dark skinned models Ajak Deng, Khoudia Diop, Leomie Anderson and Nyakim Gatwech reported that oftentimes, there were no products in their skin tone backstage, so they had to provide them themselves or even do their make-up themselves. Further, they experienced a shocking incompetence and insensitivity in hairstyling.[73]

An interviewee was told by a white male that he would consider dating someone with her skin tone, but not darker, her skin tone was the "border" to him.[74] This is a typical example of the fetishization of light-skinned Black women that has been consolidated among other things through hip hop lyrics.[75] It is extremely hurtful not just to the person involved and to dark-skinned people in general, but to society as a whole. Liberation from white supremacist, patriarchal ideas of beauty is prevented by a nuanced hierarchy, where everyone is glad to have at least some people under them.

Deng's, Diop's, Anderson's and Gatwech's experiences are further rooted in texturism: Describing the discrimination or mistreatment of hair texture, the term is especially used in connection to Black people affected by it. A Statement about this

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[72] Comp. Gassam Asare, Forbes: "What is fetishization and how does it contribute to racism?" (2021)
[73] Comp. BET Her, Black Like Me: "Dark Skinned Models Talk About Their Struggles In The Industry" (2018)
[74] Comp. Conversation Elena and Noa
[75] Comp. ColorismHealing, Webb: „Colorism in Hip Hop: Keeping it Real" (2013)

phenomenon can be found in an interviewee's experiences: Maïmuna stated that she received an exponentially higher number of compliments for her hair in a month where she was wearing braids. According to her, this might have a connection to braids being read as a more feminine hairstyle than short, curly hair. Anyway, the compliments made her feel more beautiful and when she took out her braids, she knew that the time of her hair being complimented regularly was over.[76]

[76] Comp. Conversation with Selma and Maïmuna

4.3. Experiences of trans Women

Another group of women with a unique view on beauty standards are trans women. Their experiences are characterized by breaking gender norms or more precisely various phenomena that trans women are confronted with in cisnormative patriarchy. These phenomena shall be described in the following. Important to state is that there are no strict borders between them, they are closely connected or even overlapping. Still, the chosen order of the topics should help the reader navigate through this network of interdependent mechanisms of trans women's psyches and experiences of discrimination.

4.3.1. Femininity under Consideration of Cisnormativity

Femininity is a concept that seems obviously connected to women. However, it has a special relevance for trans women, as they are not even close to the representation in femininity cis women have. The outdated and transphobic idea that trans people "change their gender", in the case of trans women "from male to female" is unfortunately still very present, even in the trans community. Therefore, there is a pressure for trans women to feminize their appearance from their first outing on.

In local trans community events, which are supposed to be safer spaces, this can sometimes be observed in its most toxic forms: Interviewee Fiona told that at such an event, person A complimented person B by saying that she had so little and blonde arm hair, she needn't shave it. Instantly, everyone else checked their arms and compared them to the others'.[77] So, the general, stereotypical image of (hairless) femininity is very present in the trans community - but why is this so harmful? Firstly, these stereotypes are harmful to all women, as they pressure them to fit into one ideal. Secondly, they are undeniably more damaging in transfeminine communities, as a large part of trans women haven't got the privilege of a relatively hairless body, while often struggling with an augmented amount of insecurities caused by cisnormative, binary concepts of gender and beatings, killings and violations of trans people one can hear and read in news or even experience in one's own life.

[77] Comp. Conversation with Joséphine and Fiona

A field where stereotypical femininity is utmost present is medical transitioning. Fiona says that the question she has always heard is whether she has yet started taking hormones and if yes, for how long she has been taking them - never, whether she wanted to take hormones or not.[78] Being a trans woman and not transitioning medically is not a real option in society, but neither in the community. Even for not wanting genital surgery, for “just” taking hormones, one has to justify oneself often.

The root cause for this is cisnormativity: The idea that body and gender are linked, the belief that in order for a body to be female, it has to have a uterus, or at least a vulva, vagina and breasts. Cisnormativity prevents us from accepting a body with penis or/and without (clearly visible) breasts as female. Trans liberation ought to fight for the separation of body and gender, so that everyone who identifies as a woman is seen as a woman, regardless of their body. Only when there is no pressure to change one’s body to “match” one’s identity, trans people can live self-determined and free.

4.3.2. Dysphoria and Internalized Transphobia

Hence, the beauty standard for trans women is conforming to cis based ideas of femininity. In practice, this leads to dysphoria: Trans women feel bad about everything that is not feminine “enough” about them. One of those traits often is body hair. Clearly, this is based on the general beauty standard of hairless women’s bodies. Still, trans women’s experiences with body hair differ from those of cis women, as indicated in chapter 4.1. Body hair is often connected to dysphoria: On one hand, trans women remove their body hair to reduce gender dysphoria or compensate for (phantom-) masculinity, on the other hand, they use body hair removal as an instrument to pass, sometimes as a rational measure without a background of dysphoria. In addition, the point of time when they were first confronted with body hair removal as something that affects them directly and personally is usually around their inner or first outward coming-out, which is not necessarily in their early youth, where cis women are most likely to be confronted with the topic for the first time.

[78] Comp. Conversation with Joséphine and Fiona

Still, trans women report that their view on femininity shifted over time and they became more relaxed, less fixed in their idea of what they have to look like or how strictly they have to pass. Sometimes, this phenomenon of emancipation is even stronger for trans women than for cis women.This is because they are more likely to consider changes in their appearance in the form of hormone replacement therapy or gender-affirming surgeries. Then, they might experience a more radical change of attitude because they realize what far-reaching interventions beauty standards and cisnormativity made them consider. Joséphine states: “In this regard, I went through an extremely strong change. I would say that if I had started something I had planned back then, I would regret it by now.”[79]

Further, trans women simply have different body hair patterns than cis women. This concerns chest and stomach hair, facial hair and an increased hairiness in general. Of course, these are tendencies. There certainly are cis women that are very hairy and trans women with naturally little body hair - but that is not what this is about. The important point is that trans women with much body hair are considered less feminine and beautiful and this becomes a group dynamic within the trans community. Removing body hair is a common passing and euphoria tip in trans internet culture. This might seem to be no problem at first sight, but in the end, it reproduces the misogynistic standard of hairless women and forces it upon individuals that are less likely to reach this standard, while already standing under more mental pressure in general.

Mostly, dysphoria is triggered not because trans individuals themselves don’t like some feature about themselves, but rather due to being confronted with expectations, ideals and hateful feedback. Fiona states: „90% of my dysphoria comes from how society perceives and categorizes me, not from how I truly feel.“[80] In conclusion, dysphoria seems to come largely from outside, from the realization that one doesn’t manage to reach cisnormative ideals. Naturally, a transphobic concept makes trans people feel bad about themselves. Thus, it can be argued that dysphoria is connected to (internalized) transphobia and not (just) a psychological condition that exists in a vacuum.

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[79] Conversation with Joséphine and Fiona
[80] Conversation with Joséphine and Fiona

Natalie Wynn shows this with the example of facial feminization surgery (FFS). On one hand, some trans women feel like they need FFS to combat dysphoria - and therefore declare it a medical necessity. On the other hand, the influence of cisnormative and even for cis women unrealistic beauty standards like the instagram face can not be denied. Where is the distinction between a trans woman wanting FFS and a cis woman wanting cosmetic facial surgery? Therefore, some say that undergoing FFS is motivated by internalized transphobia, because it is based on the assumption that trans women have to change their body in order to be valid. Simultaneously, it is also transphobic to tell a trans person to accept the way they look and deny them opportunities to alleviate discomfort with their bodies. Natalie Wynn stated that subconsciously she hoped that FFS would solve her body image issues, but had to acknowledge after her surgery that only mental work and political liberation can do so sustainably.[81]

Joséphine mentions: “If I were to have surgery in order to feel safer, it would feel like I was surrendering to society. As if I had to give up my principles in order to live more unburdened. This is a conflict that I have: I would be acting against my values, but maybe I would be happier because I wouldn't have to deal with all the stress I have got now because of how society reads me.”[82]

The question behind all this is: Does one want to fulfill society’s cisnormative expectations of femininity and change one’s body and behavior accordingly or does one want to resist and fight them, to gain the freedom to be who one wants to be and own the body one was born with, but in turn lose the security of not being attacked verbally or physically? In the end, it is crucial that every trans woman can answer this question herself and without being criticized for her answer.

4.3.3. Passing and Euphoria

What the previous texts implied, but didn’t mention explicitly, is the concept of “passing”. Passing is when a (trans) woman is perceived as female by strangers. This concept exists, because the first thing we do, when we see a human individual,

[81] Comp. Wynn, ContraPoints: “Beauty” (2019)
[82] Conversation with Joséphine and Fiona

is categorize them into the gender binary. Often, passing and euphoria are intertwined: Emma shared that a construction worker catcalled her saying: “Ciao bella!”. While she knew it was catcalling and catcalling is bad, she was still charmed, because a stranger perceived her as a woman, a beautiful one on top.[83]

Dysphoria and euphoria can therefore not be understood as feelings a trans woman develops intrinsically, but rather as a chain of action and reaction: The construction worker calls Emma beautiful, as a reaction, she feels good. Now, in Emma’s story, this is not directly hurtful - experiences of Fiona’s show that this can be the case. She has short hair and prefers to dress rather butch. “I want to pass, but still be able to present myself the way I want. This makes me consider surgeries that I wouldn't do for myself - or do for myself only to the degree that I feel more comfortable and accepted in society.”[84] Like that, Fiona doesn't have the privilege to be her authentic self and physically and mentally safe at the same time. “I fear being read as a cis man and always having to find a way to let people know I'm a woman.”[85], she said.

4.3.4. The Gender Binary

Another intersection is indicated by Fiona’s Experiences: The pressure of hyperfemininity consolidates the gender binary. Femininity and masculinity are understood as opposite and mutually exclusive. A woman ought to present feminine, a man masculine. This is the case for cis people as well, but for trans people, the consequences are heavier: One’s identity is doubted, wrong pronouns are used, dysphoria is triggered. Looking at beauty standards as a binary concept, we are led back to cisnormativity: Trans women tend to focus on “masculine” features about themselves more than cis women do. By that, they see masculinity and flaws that are not visible to other people. I call this Phantom Masculinity, based on the Phantom Fat people who have lost weight in a short time still see, even if it has long gone. Trans women then want to compensate for these previously mentioned “masculine” features or make them disappear in order to make clear that they are an exclusively feminine person and miles away from being masculine. In this effort of separation,

[83] Comp. Conversation Emma and Sophia
[84] Conversation Joséphine and Fiona
[85] Conversation Joséphine and Fiona

they are following cis women’s patterns of behavior and thereby beauty standards for cis women.

In conclusion, there are no separate beauty standards for trans women. Rather, the same standards that apply to cis women have different, sometimes more drastic consequences for trans women.

5. Practical Part: Group Process and Booklet

As mentioned previously, my practical part consisted of a workshop program I organized for a group of young women. I invited white women and Women of Color, cis women and trans women I know and expected to have interesting and different perspectives on beauty standards. We spent an afternoon together to think and talk about beauty standards and what influences these have on them. The script I prepared as a basis for discussion can be found in the attachment, as well as the interviews and conversations resulting from the group process.

The programme started with general questions like “How beautiful have you felt in the past weeks or months?” with multiple choice answers on a scale from one to ten. Then came more specific questions, for example how the participants felt about their weight and body shape and whether they thought they were too critical with themselves regarding their beauty. The topics of body hair removal and make-up followed, as they have the ability to show at what point beauty standards turn into social pressure. The results of these questions link Chapter 3 and 4 of my theoretical part. Later, the process became more open: The participants discussed the question: “How do beauty standards influence your self-perception, your feeling of self-worth, your mental health?” The resulting conversations were often very intimate, even if the participants sometimes met for the first time that day. Soon after, I started transcribing them, so I could use them as a source for Chapter 4.

Furthermore, I turned some quotes of the conversations into a booklet. The motivation for the booklet was to create something that can spread the idea behind my paper in an accessible way, as many people who showed interest in my work had little confidence in their English skills. So, the booklet is supposed to summarize my paper in German and continue the transforming energy of the conversations that inspired me to write this paper as well as the ones I had with my interviewees. It gives an insight into young women’s experiences in a short and concise form. Besides quotes taken out of the conversation of the group process, it contains explanations and thoughts of mine about a chosen few problematic mechanisms behind beauty standards, such as colorism or cisnormativity. Further, there are some graphic poems as reactions to quotes and experiences of the interviewees.

6. Conclusion - Theoretical Part

Through my research in books, online and in conversations, I found answers to my questions - “What are beauty standards for women in the west today?”, “What is their history?”, “What is their impact on young women?” and “What are different experiences of white women vs. Women of Color and cis women vs. trans women?”. Some of the answers seem quite satisfying and complete to me, whereas in others, I can see that I could have continued working for some weeks or even months. Still, I would say that I managed to stop at a reasonable point and to keep the promise of a theoretical focus. The outcome of my paper can be summed up in the following 12 most important key points, some of them unifying conclusions from different chapters.

1. Beauty standards have become more extreme and more widespread in the past decade with the help of social media and some celebrities.

2. The icon and the popular standard are two beauty ideals that exist in parallel, they result in a detailed hierarchy of beauty.

3. Present beauty standards are a coincidental snapshot in an ongoing historical evolution. A part of that are the developments and movements of resistance against beauty standards.

4. Ideals based on problematic ideologies have been normalized, their background has been forgotten over time.

5. Beauty standards are linked with images of success, status, trustworthiness and health.

6. Beauty is something that occupies young women greatly.

7. There are clear patterns, what young women aspire to concerning their beauty.

8. Young women of all considered identities are more critical about their own appearance than about others'.

9. Often, alleged flaws are rooted in formative single events or experiences.

10. Differences in race and gender identity result in completely different experiences and perspectives. Experiences of discrimination lead to increased stress.

11. Women of color deal with a lack of representation and various forms of discrimination that has an impact on how beautiful and self-confident they feel.

12. Trans women have a unique relationship to femininity and through that a unique perspective on beauty: At their example, the restrictive character of Western beauty standards, especially concerning gender, becomes easier to grasp.

My first goal was to get an idea of what the most prevalent beauty standards for (young) women in the West are at the moment and then share my newly found knowledge with the readers of my paper. I think I have found a balanced mix of concrete, physical examples (The Instagram Face and Slim Thickness), putting them into a context (icon and popular standard), showing influential structures such as racism and last but not least stating that cultural dynamics can not be simplified into a good vs. evil scheme, in which every celebrity has their fixed place.

The aspiration of researching and then telling the history of beauty standards was already quite ambitious. I am glad to have focused on three aspects of this gigantic subject, two of which were examples of beautifying techniques that are relatable for readers in the 21st century. Hopefully, people who read my paper will reflect and question the present beauty standards a little more, given their historical background.

My last aim connected to the theoretical part was to get an idea of how beauty standards influence young women in my environment. Regarding how deep into

people's life stories and psyches this influence goes, I am satisfied with what I could extract and integrate.
In general, writing chapters 2 and 3 was very simple, yet not easy. I had the theory and I could let it stay theoretical. Chapter 4 in contrast was very different: It was challenging to find a good balance between the structures and mechanisms on one hand and experiences and anecdotes on the other hand.

Something I have been excited about since the beginning is what impact this long and extensive research will have on me. My research made me think more differentiated in areas which I simplified too much in my mind before, as you could witness in chapter 2.4. - Humans of Beauty. Further, my understanding of racism in connection to beauty has become a little more concrete, as I heard what people I know well have experienced. Before the work on this paper, especially the conversations of the group process, my knowledge about racism came from books and podcasts made by people I couldn't speak to personally.

When it comes to verbalizing the perspective of being transgender in chapter 4.3., however, I learnt to sum up what counts in a more straightforward way. I wouldn't have expected that I was going to have such difficulties during the process of writing about things that concern me so directly. I struggled a lot to articulate the many thoughts, feelings and experiences I have had myself and have known from other befriended trans women. In the end, I have once more gained courage and will to detach myself and my gender presentation from norms that have been designed to exclude trans people like me.

What I could make visible in a way I hoped I could are the different perspectives women have, depending on their identities. I don't think anyone who has read my paper can deny that Women of Color are influenced differently by western beauty standards than white women are. Neither could they neglect the differences in the impact of beauty standards on cis versus on trans women.

A doubt that accompanied me in the first half of my working process is whether it was a good idea to write this paper in English instead of German. Sometimes, I couldn't

find English words to write down exactly what I wanted to say and could perfectly express in German. Maybe, I would have been able to concentrate more on content if I hadn’t have to worry about language so much. Still, it was a notable experience and a suitable challenge. I had the intention of touching the limits of my comfort zone and it happened - what more could I ask for!

7. Conclusion - Practical Part

A key cognition the practical part generated is that beauty standards are a topic that is in many minds, but on few lips. An amazing experience of this circumstance was the group process and its productive energy in the idyllic garden of the Laborhaus, where the personal, partly abstract thoughts young women had in mind became lively conversations. It showed that the topic is rather stigmatized in everyday life and as a result eagerly discussed when the framework is given. Everyone felt that these conversations were of substantial worth for the participants, as they could learn from one another and feel that they are never alone with their experiences and feelings.

The quotes extracted from the interviews were a blessing for chapter 4. They made the chapter more relatable and my findings more credible, as the mechanisms I learned about in my research could be found in people's real lives as well.
However, the extent of these conversations got a little out of hand, because two groups seemed to have lost the first 30 minutes of audio recording. For that reason, I extended the time for the conversation to 50 minutes, so that every conversation could be included in my paper. Then, it turned out that the vanished 2x30 minutes were in fact not lost at all. So, I had more material to transcribe than initially intended. This was reinforced by the conversation with Selma and Maïmuna a few weeks after the group process. It was such a thrilling discussion, we ended up talking for nearly two hours.

For a next time, I would invest more discipline in limiting the interview's durations. Even if it has also been an advantage to have so many experiences to write about, it was nearly impossible to keep an overall view of this mass of talks. I would not say that this reduces the quality and worth of my paper, but it still feels strange having written approximately 160 pages, whereof only 45 are the "real" paper.

Creating the booklet was a lot of fun and felt like an effective thing to invest time into. At first, I feared that it would be too much work, but it was perfectly doable. I hope my booklet can create a little more visibility for Women of Color, for trans women, for women and their perspectives on beauty standards in general. The work process was very smooth and vivid and I am very excited and confident about the result.

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10. Declaration of Originality

eigenständigkeitserklärung

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